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KARDASHIANS

A Critical Anthology



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FAMILY BRANDS

The Kardashian-Jenners and the Nelsons

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The Kardashian-Jenners have been criticized for many things – poor taste, conspicuous consumption, cosmetic surgeries, lack of talent. Those who believe culture should be exempt from crass commercialism are particularly appalled by the Kardashian-Jenners' brazen exploitation of their celebrity. They have endorsed brands and created their own brand lines, leveraging their television programs, primarily *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2006–2021), and social-media content to cross-promote their businesses. Kim has endorsed dozens of products, from shoes and cosmetics to diet pills and credit cards, and created her own fashion line, SKIMS™. Khloé has endorsed diet products and also created her own brand, Good American. Kourtney has promoted products through her lifestyle brand Poosh. Kendall has had a tequila brand and has appeared in commercials, including an infamous Pepsi commercial. Kylie sold so many of her lip kits that a mainstream cosmetics company bought majority interest in them. All this has led some to dismiss Kardashian-Jenner content as culturally debased. “The Kardashians have come to represent late capitalist greed, influencer vapidly, and cultural appropriation”, complains one observer (Corey, 2022). They are seen as “human marketing campaigns”, notes another (Baldwin, 2022). However, the Kardashian-Jenners are not doing anything new or particularly unusual. They belong to what I call a “family brand”: members of a family who become characters in entertainment formats, thereby building a public identity as an interacting family, and who then successfully commercialize that identity by endorsing brands or selling their own.

Of course the Kardashian-Jenners have not been the only family mining their relationships for reality programs. The Duggars family in *19 Kids and Counting* (2008–2015) and the Gosselin family in *Jon and Kate Plus 8* (2007–2009) and its sequel, *Kate Plus 8* (2010–2017), appeared in putatively documentary-style programs centered on the challenges of raising a large family. However, the reality

television family show most often viewed as the precursor to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is *The Osbournes* (2002–2005), in which the former heavy metal rock star Ozzy Osbourne and his family practiced rather conventional family values while wearing tattoos and using profanity. Structured like a classic domestic sitcom, *The Osbournes* purported to depict the family's "real life" (Linder, 2005; Gillan, 2004). Notably, *The Osbournes'* success led to licensing deals for a variety of merchandise including lunchboxes and toys, as well as subsequent television appearances.

Performers in entertainment industries have often sought supplemental income by endorsing products: advertisers hope to sell more products if celebrities endorse them, while performers want additional income. In the late-nineteenth century, actresses on the legitimate stage such as Sarah Bernhardt endorsed products; in 1882 actress Lillie Langtry endorsed Pears soap (Segrave, 2005, p. 5). In the early 1900s, musical performers in theater and on the vaudeville circuit were sometimes paid to "plug" songs on stage so that composers could sell more copies of the sheet music; some even became wealthy selling their own songs as sheet music (Toll, 1982, p. 102). *Buffalo Bill Cody and the Wild West Show* (1883–1913) sold posters, dime novels, and licensed products featuring stars such as Annie Oakley (Kasson, 2001). Neither was it uncommon for vaudeville stars to endorse products. Vaudeville and musical star Eddie Cantor endorsed a facial mud mask, Mineralava, going so far as to sing a song about it in a 1923 Ziegfeld Follies show (Weinstein, 2018, p. 65). Movie stars often endorsed products; 1920s starlets appeared in advertisements for Lux Toilet Soap. By the radio era, the late 1920s to early 1950s, American stars of theater, film, comedy, and music regularly appeared on sponsored radio programs and often endorsed a sponsor's product directly. On radio Eddie Cantor promoted products such as Sunkist oranges, Camel cigarettes and Texaco gasoline (Meyers, 2014, p. 149).

Family acts have long been an effective strategy for attracting audiences. Traveling circuses have often included families such as the Fratellinis and the "Flying Wallendas" (Morris, 1976). Vaudeville was full of family acts, such as the Seven Little Foys and the Nicholas Brothers. Gene Kelly, later a major 1950s Hollywood film star, got his start as a member of the Five Kellys, a 1920s dancing "kid act" (TravSD, 2013). Musical acts of performing and singing families have been common in both highbrow and lowbrow venues. The Mozart family toured in the eighteenth century (Halliwell, 1998); the "Trapp Singing Family" was made famous in the film *The Sound of Music* (1965); and many popular music acts are led by siblings, such as the BeeGees, Haim, and the Jonas Brothers.

One of the most successful families in twentieth-century entertainment was the Nelsons: Ozzie and Harriet, with their sons David and Rick. In many ways the Nelsons' long career in popular music, radio, and television prefigure the Kardashian-Jenners'; an overview of their strategies reveals some commonalities. Their television sitcom, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–

1966), in which each family member performed as him or herself, is remembered as the apotheosis of bland family sitcoms (Jones, 1992; Liebman, 1995; Gillan, 2004). Although Ozzie designed his fictional eponymous character as lovably bumbling, often confused and incompetent, the real Ozzie was a canny entertainer, producer, and writer, fully in control of the program that he conceived, wrote and directed. Like 'momager' Kris Jenner, Ozzie carefully oversaw his family's careers and shaped their public image through their public appearances and brand endorsements.

The Nelsons started out in the lower rungs of the entertainment industry, like the Kardashian-Jenners. Kim began as an adjunct to the then-more famous Paris Hilton; her family was best known for Robert Kardashian's friendship with O.J. Simpson. For the Nelsons, Ozzie started out in the early 1930s as a touring bandleader playing current hits in dancehalls (Nelson, 1973). He cross-promoted his band by appearing for free on radio shows, which would lead to paid appearances. Aware that audiences liked to watch pretty girls, Nelson hired a "girl singer", the experienced vaudevillian Harriet Hilliard, who married him in 1935 (p. 90). Nelson realized that his and Harriet's musicianship was inferior to that of competing dance bands, so he worked to make their musical performances something like "miniature musical comedies", including joking patter about their marriage (p. 138). Likewise, Kris probably understood that gentle self-deprecating humour offset any talent deficits; as she said to Kim in one episode, "Well, you know, it's not like you could sing or dance. We made the best of it" (quoted in Giggey, 2017, p. 121).

Just as the Kardashian-Jenners found that endorsing products was useful for connecting more effectively with fans, who could feel parasocial closeness to them by using their brands, so did the Nelsons when endorsing brands on radio shows. In 1933 Ozzie and Harriet performed on a weekly radio program, *The Bakers' Broadcast*, produced by the ad agency J. Walter Thompson for the food conglomerate Standard Brands to promote Fleischmann's yeast (Nelson, 1973, p. 94). During skits between musical numbers, Ozzie and Harriet would banter about their marriage. In the 1930s, radio was still a new medium and many believed it influenced listeners far more deeply than print media. Because broadcast signals were received in the privacy of the family home instead of in a public theater, many radio performers sought to develop a pseudo-domestic intimacy with audiences (Lovicchio, 2005). Performing on live radio, Ozzie believed, made the Nelsons seem to their fans more like familiar neighbors than distant celebrities; their radio performances were like "visiting people in their homes", so that audiences viewed them "as friends as well as entertainers" (p. 139). Likewise, the Kardashian-Jenners used reality television conventions to achieve a similar kind of authenticity, drawing on documentary filmmaking conventions such as fly-on-the-wall camerawork, handheld or imperfect shot compositions, portable lighting, and on-location shooting to suggest to audiences that they were viewing something more truthful than polished Hollywood-produced scripted content. Each hoped that audiences would believe they were experiencing a representation of their authentic family life.

Like Kris, who pitched the Kardashian program as a domestic sitcom (Howarth, 2015), Ozzie also realized he could parlay skits about family life into a sitcom radio show that he himself produced and controlled. Again like Kris, who served as executive producer, Ozzie also sought direct creative control. He wrote and produced a radio sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which premiered on the CBS radio network (1944–1954). The title was tongue-in-cheek because the “adventures” took place in an anodyne suburban setting. The premise for *Ozzie and Harriet* was that the Nelsons had stopped touring with their big band in order to settle down with their two young children; their inexperience with suburban life would provide many “fish out of water” situations as they learned to live on their own rather than rely on hotel employees to cook, clean, and maintain their living quarters. Their “adventures” included much gentle self-mockery: Ozzie was repeatedly befuddled by some basic task of suburban homeownership. Likewise, the Kardashian-Jenners employed self-deprecating humour to offset potential resentment of their wealth and celebrity. In the first scene of the first episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Kris teases Kim for the size of her rear end. Had Kim insisted on presenting herself as perfect, or had she not been willing to be the literal butt of the joke, audiences might not ever have connected with her or the family.

Children impart authenticity to representations of family life. While Kylie and Kendall were at first minor characters, being much younger than the Kardashian sisters, they soon became far more central to the show. Ozzie likewise decided to use his sons to play themselves beginning in 1949, after having hired actors to play them on radio for five years (Nelson, p. 199). The relative ingenuousness of children could enhance the program’s verisimilitude. Ozzie claimed to write down exactly how his sons spoke, so that their scripted dialogue would reflect their real-life selves (Nelson, p. 199). Ozzie often claimed that the plot lines were based on the family’s actual experiences, just as the Kardashian-Jenners would insist that the reality program captured their authentic family interactions. While Kris praised her children’s “great work ethic” (Schwabel, 2012), Nelson played down his children’s professional life, insisting that the production schedule was arranged around their schoolwork (Nelson, p. 204). Though the Kardashians improvised their dialogue, they followed carefully produced plots, identifiable as A, B, and C storylines, that often appeared to expose real familial conflicts that were, remarkably, often resolved within one episode. Both shows, then, purport to represent the actual families speaking authentically and navigating real-life situations with humour, resolving episodes with reinforced family bonds.

The Kardashian-Jenners mastered social media sooner than most other celebrities and they have shown a willingness to experiment with new platforms as, for example, in Kylie’s early use of Snapchat (Leppert, 2015). Likewise, in 1952 Ozzie was quick to move into a new medium, television, 20 years into his show business career. He hedged his bets, however, by continuing to produce a separately scripted radio version of *Ozzie and Harriet* for two more years.

While the Kardashian-Jenners were early to recognize the power of social media to build parasocial relationships with fans, Ozzie was likely reluctant to give up what he understood to be the parasocial power of radio, in which the voice-only medium allowed audiences to use their imaginations, while early television, with its low resolution and static shot compositions, might leave less to the imagination while lacking much visual appeal.

The television version of *Ozzie and Harriet* opens with an exterior shot of their large suburban home. Each family member appears in turn as they come out the front door to face the camera and be introduced by voiceover. The title sequence for *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* would satirize this opening by depicting chaotic family behavior lining up to face the camera and the revelation that the fancy house in the background was simply an image on a backdrop that falls down, signaling both the comedic intent and ironic self-awareness of the manufactured reality of unscripted shows. However, both programs center most of their narratives inside the home, often in the kitchen, to emphasize family togetherness (Giggey, 2017, p. 138).

When endorsing products, the Kardashian-Jenners have often demonstrated them on their social media feeds, showing fans make-up techniques, outfits, nutritional supplements, and, of course, showing how brands fit into their aspirational lifestyle. Likewise, the Nelsons demonstrated their sponsors' products. From 1952 to 1956, General Electric's appliance brand Hotpoint sponsored *Ozzie and Harriet*, so Ozzie integrated Hotpoint kitchen appliances into the set and plot lines. Harriet courted her audience by playing the character of a full-time wife and mother, devotedly preparing food on Hotpoint appliances and tending her family, despite the fact that she had a full staff at her actual home. Harriet demonstrates appliances during the Hotpoint commercials, deftly blurring the transition from program to commercial and back in the hope of keeping audience attention during the interruption.

The Kardashian-Jenners appear to have creative control over how they have promoted other companies' products on their social media content, possibly because marketing executives are well aware of the sisters' promotional skills (Maheshwari, 2016). However, executives at brands have often wanted content control, or at least an influence over how the brand is depicted. From 1956 to 1961 when Eastman Kodak, the film and camera company, was the sponsor of *Ozzie and Harriet*, its executives expected the Nelsons to incorporate picture-taking and cameras into the program, as well as appear in print advertisements and at Kodak employee conventions (Potter, 1956, 1 May). The family participated in at least one commercial per episode, as when Harriet demonstrates a Kodak home movie camera to capture family memories and Ozzie interrupts to explain that dads would like it for filming fishing trips. Although Ozzie complied with Kodak's directive that he include plot lines incorporating photography, as in a 1958 episode in which he takes a photograph of the neighborhood children with a pony, he had to fight off Kodak executives' efforts to interfere in other ways. They disliked his character, whose pratfalls

and self-deprecating dialogue ran counter to Kodak executives' expectations that father figures on television should convey authority and command respect (Potter, 1956, 27 July). After Kodak's sponsorship ended, Ozzie continued to serve other sponsors until 1966 by integrating products into the program content, as when the family eats Aunt Jemima pancakes at breakfast, Harriet serves Coca-Cola to guests, or Ozzie reminds his sons to gargle with Listerine. While today such brand integrations may appear contrived, the purpose was to smooth the disjuncture between advertising and program content while associating the brand with the aspirational middle-class lifestyle of the Nelsons. The Kardashian-Jenners, on the other hand, have not usually bothered to be subtle about brand integrations but instead have openly discussed endorsement deals or merchandizing opportunities within the program.

Both Kris and Ozzie are canny observers of popular culture trends. Kris recognized reality television as a vehicle for her daughters' modeling and endorsement careers, and many plot lines concern their modeling or promotional work. In the mid-1950s Ozzie was quick to identify rock 'n' roll as an up-and-coming genre, a controversial stance at the time, and he sought to build his son Rick's music career through his musical appearances on *Ozzie and Harriet*. Ozzie created plot lines to include Rick performing rock 'n' roll music in venues such as a school dance. Rick's first music performance in 1957, seen by millions of viewers (far more than could have been reached in a live venue), was his cover of "I'm Walkin'", a Fats Domino song. Ozzie facilitated Rick's contract with a music label, helped produce his recordings, and assiduously promoted him as a teenage heartthrob (Nelson, p. 252). This new family storyline was especially useful because the Nelson children had aged out of cute domestic scenes. Despite Rick's early accidental death in a 1985 air crash, his twin sons would carry on the family tradition and become mildly successful music artists in the 1990s.

The Nelsons, then, employed many of the strategies later employed by the Kardashian-Jenners in order to attract and appeal to audiences. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* at first styled itself as a humorous domestic sitcom, like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (which never makes a turn toward drama). While the former was unscripted and shot on location and the latter was scripted and filmed on a set, both purport to represent authentic family life, demonstrating deep family bonds despite celebrity. Both families stick together despite the greater stardom of a single member. In the Nelson family, Rick became a pop superstar while the Kardashian-Jenner sisters have had to compete with Kim's global fame. Maybe Rick would have become a superstar without his father's open efforts to build him up as a teen heartthrob on the family's sitcom, and maybe it would have been possible for Kylie to reach social media stardom and cosmetic empire moguldom without years of appearances as a character in the family drama, but I think it more likely that their individual success grew out of their family's brand.

Audiences value authenticity, and what audiences deem to be authentic has changed over time. Today, the stilted dialogue of *Ozzie and Harriet* and blatant

product placements would no longer read as an authentic representation of family life, but it seemed to work for large numbers of viewers in the 1950s, perhaps because of the aspirational yet achievable representation that Ozzie tried so hard to perfect. The Kardashian-Jenners have long ago left minor celebrity status behind and have ascended into the celestial sphere of billionaire-music-sports-television-social-media royalty. They thus risk losing the sympathy they so carefully cultivated through reflexive and self-deprecating humour and the representations of interfamilial conflict. In both cases, the narratives, whether scripted or not, were designed to create a cohesive family entertainment brand. The sense of humour in each program, although quite different in tone and style, was crafted to appeal to audiences seeking engaging narratives of aspirational yet relatable American family life. The Kardashian-Jenners have exceeded the Nelsons in fame and fortune, yet their cultural impact is still largely underestimated by most critics. If we consider them as a particularly successful family brand in a long line of family brands, their commonalities with earlier family brands might help us understand the effectiveness of their strategies for attracting and retaining audience attention.

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